

LAND AND SEA: CARL SCHMITT'S PHILOSOPHICAL GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract

The present article discusses Carl Schmitt's philosophical geography according to his work *Land and Sea. A World-historical reflection*. In Schmitt's philosophical geography we can identify five major areas: 1. Land and sea as antagonistic elements; 2. Spatial revolution and its consequences; 3. The world-historical tension between Catholicism and Protestantism against the background of the antagonism between the land and the sea; 4. Industrial Revolution and social-technical progress as the foundational factors of new elemental forces; 5. In a given world-historical situation, a man has the possibility to make a choice between the elements and therefore transcend any former spatial limits whilst gaining new spatial consciousness and horizons. This examination also traces the possible influence of Ernst Kapp and Friedrich Ratzel on Schmitt's views. At the end Schmitt's contribution is discussed in relation to global changes occurring in contemporary world.

Keywords: Philosophical geography, spatial revolution, land and sea, nomos.

Introduction

In *Land and Sea*¹⁹ Schmitt tried to analyse fundamental changes happening in the world and their causes. If we discuss the work from this standpoint, *Land and Sea* can be seen as a systematic work in which we can outline five major areas: 1. land and sea as antagonistic elements; 2. spatial revolution and its consequences; 3. the world-historical tension between Catholicism and Protestantism against the background of the antagonism between the land and the sea; 4. the industrial Revolution and socio-technical progress as the foundational factors of new elemental forces; 5. in a given world-historical situation a man has the possibility, to make a choice between the elements and therefore transcend any former spatial limits, whilst gaining new spatial consciousness and horizons.

The five major areas above create the framework within which we will discuss the philosophical geography of Carl Schmitt in *Land and Sea*. Let me discuss them in order.

Schmitt considers the opposition between land and sea as a universal-historical thesis: “World history is the history of the wars waged by maritime powers against land or continental powers and by land powers against sea or maritime powers”.²⁰ He uses biblical symbols to denote this world-historical opposition: a land power symbolically is represented as a giant land beast, Behemoth, and the symbol of maritime power is represented as a giant sea beast Leviathan.

Schmitt’s historical-geographical analysis, as he himself declares, is based on the three-stage scheme of historical development by Hegelian Ernst Kapp (1808-1896). Nevertheless in Schmitt’s analysis the first *Potamic*

¹⁹ Land und Meer. Eine weltgeschichtliche Betrachtung, Leipzig, Verlag von Philipp Reclam, 1942. Hereafter I will refer to the English translation: Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, translated and with a foreword by Simona Draghici, Washington DC, Plutarch Press, 1997.

²⁰ *Land and Sea*, p. 5.

stage, that of river civilizations, is omitted.²¹ He reflects about “thalassic” Venice and then goes to explore the “oceanic” power – England.

Schmitt tries to verify the thesis of opposition between land and sea by using historical examples: he discusses ancient Athens, Rome, the Byzantine Empire, and at the end devotes his attention to the Republic of Venice. Schmitt considers the Republic of Venice as the typical “thalassic” or maritime power and characterises it as “a highly developed, coastal and lagoon civilization”.²² Though at the same time, he remarks that “to limit oneself to the practice of maritime navigation and to build up a civilization by exploiting a favourable coastal position, is altogether different from turning the entire historical and collective existence of a people from land towards the sea, another element altogether.”²³ Schmitt tries to show why Venice stagnated on the “thalassic” stage. He ruminates that the very presence of the festivity named “marriage to the sea” (*sposalizio del mare*) by Venetians indicated that they were not true “roamers of the seas” as, for example, the Vikings were. “The symbolical weddings or betrothals, on the other hand, presupposed a distinction, nay, a radical opposition between the sacrificer and the divinity to which the sacrifice was offered. Such offerings

²¹ We can also make further parallels between Kapp and Schmitt. In the second part of his *Philosophical Geography* Kapp discusses the effects of the Age of Discovery. According to him after the Age of Discovery spatial limits are broken (“West and East are without limits”) and sea acts as a great liberator of humans (*Philosophische oder vergleichende allgemeine Erdkunde in wissenschaftlicher Darstellung der Erdverhältnisse und des Menschenlebens nach ihrem innern Zusammenhang*, vol. 1, Braunschweig, Verlag von George Westermann, 1845, p. 263). We can also compare Kapp’s description of Venice to that of Schmitt’s. Kapp refers to Venice as a “lagoon-state” (*Vergleichende allgemeine Erdkunde in wissenschaftlicher Darstellung*, second edition, Braunschweig, Verlag von George Westermann, 1868, p. 329) and discusses its importance at length. All I want to say is that perhaps Schmitt found in Kapp’s *Philosophische Erdkunde* more than three stage schema of potamic – thalassic – oceanic development. Kapp’s ideas had a certain influence on Schmitt but this remains the subject for future research.

²² Land and Sea, p. 10.

²³ Land and Sea, pp. 10-11.

were meant to conciliate an alien element. In the case of Venice, the ceremony clearly shows that the symbolic gesture did not derive from a basically maritime way of life.”²⁴ Schmitt also points out that the Republic of Venice mainly relied on oared vessels, galleys which further prevented it achieving a world-historical significance.

In my opinion we can also see that the reason for the stagnation of Venice at the “thalassic” stage is its *geographical location*. The Apennine Peninsula is situated in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. So, to consider this geographical factor, ocean discoveries were not an easy “task” for Venice and its rival Genoa. It is not accidental that ocean navigation was developed in the countries *along* the ocean shore: Vikings living in the Scandinavian Peninsula reached Greenland and America, the Spanish and Portuguese conquered the New World. They were quickly followed by Dutch, French and English. All these nations had easy access to the Atlantic Ocean. However, we should not forget the Ocean “pioneers” gained their experience in the Mediterranean Sea: many well known navigators from the Age of Discovery were of Italian origin (Christopher Columbus, John Cabot, Amerigo Vespucci).

In Chapters V-VIII of *Land and Sea* Schmitt analyses factors which were responsible for the spatial revolution and which were the reason for the choice of a new element (sea). These factors are whale-hunting,²⁵ hunting for fur animals in Siberia, technical progress and piracy. It is easy to notice that

²⁴ Land and Sea, p. 10.

²⁵ It is worth mentioning Schmitt’s progressive and humanistic view about whale-hunting. The German philosopher vehemently opposes aggressive hunting of the biggest mammal on the planet earth (See *Land and Sea*, p. 15). From this point of view Schmitt is the thinker who pays particular attention to the questions of protection of the environment. The problem of whale-hunting is still with us. See for example <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/story?id=97519&page=1#.T84eE5Kaf9U> (Accessed 01.03.2013).

all these activities are based on the striving for economical profit. In the case of piracy and whale-hunting the ocean acts as a ‘luring’ element which opens unlimited perspectives of profit-making. This is a very important aspect in Schmitt’s philosophical geography.²⁶

According to Schmitt, spatial revolution is closely related to the fundamental forces of history, which bring “new lands and new seas into the visual field of human awareness. [...] Actually, all important changes in history more often than not imply a new perception of space.”²⁷ In this context Schmitt discusses the campaigns of Alexander the Great and of Julius Caesar and the Crusades. These world-historical events led to the establishment of the modern notion of “Europe”, with concomitant changes

²⁶ In the epilogue of the third edition of *Land and Sea* (1981) Schmitt, being under the influence of Hegel, pays more attention to the rush for export and colonisation which exists in civil society. H. Schneider, who has given new impetus to the notion of philosophical geography, sees in this “the late confession in the previously rejected Marxism” (See Helmut Schneider: *Philosophische Geografie: Die Bedeutung des Wassers für die Geschichte – Europa und Asien*, in: Heinz Paetzold und Wolfdietrich Schmied-Kowarzik (Hrsg.), *Interkulturelle Philosophie*, Weimar, Verlag der Bauhaus-Universität, 2007, p. 228). Before that Schmitt had already acknowledged Hegel’s contribution in *The Nomos of the Earth*. It is a very important passage, so it is worth quoting at length: “All pre-global orders were essentially *terrestrial*, even if they encompassed sea powers and *thalassocracies*. The originally terrestrial world was altered in the Age of Discovery, when the earth first was encompassed and measured by the global consciousness of European peoples. This resulted in the first *nomos* of the earth. It was based on a particular relation between the spatial order of firm land and the spatial order of free sea, and for 400 years it supported a Eurocentric international law: the *jus publicum Europaeum*. In the 16th century it was England that dared to take the step from a terrestrial to a maritime existence. A further step was taken with the industrial revolution, in the course of which the earth was newly conceived and newly measured. It was essential that the industrial revolution occurred in the country that first had taken the step to a maritime existence. This is the point at which we can approach the mystery of the new *nomos* of the earth. Until now, only one author, Hegel, has come close to this *arcanum* (secret)” (See Carl Schmitt: *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, New York: Telos Press, 2006, p. 49).

²⁷ *Land and Sea*, p. 29.

in architecture, painting, sculpture and political organisation of states.²⁸ These changes together with the Age of Discovery were further underpinned with scientific progress which firmly established the notion of an infinite world in human consciousness.²⁹

Spatial revolution opened new spaces, “that seemed endless to the Europeans who swarmed out to those distant expanses”.³⁰ The process of colonisation of the New World by Europeans included a struggle between “terrestrial” Catholicism and “maritime” Protestantism. “Calvinism was the new militant religion, perfectly adapted to the elemental thrust seawards.”³¹ In contrast to this, Catholic states were more “land-oriented”: for example, “France [...] did not follow up the strong maritime impetus, associated with Huguenot Protestantism. Ultimately, in keeping with her spiritual tradition, she pursued the line of Rome [...] By the same choice, she decided in favour of land and against the sea.”³² Thus again we see the contradiction between land and sea which underlies the historical process.

²⁸ We should consider Europe’s “continentalisation” (terrestrial existence) before crusades in the terms of opposition between land and sea. It is reflected in a subtle remark where Schmitt writes that in contrast to terrestrial Europe, where rulers and aristocracy mostly were illiterate, “in a maritime realm, the rulers could not afford ignoring those skills for long” (*Land and Sea*, p. 32). Here we should also note that Schmitt did not consider Vikings as an important factor in the medieval history, although he calls them “sea-roamers” (*Land and Sea*, p. 10). He acknowledges that Vikings reached America before Columbus, but he considers their discovery accidental, because it was not related to the genuine planetary spatial revolution. Perhaps Vikings’ raids and travels did not have such an influence on Europe as a whole as the Crusades had, but their contribution in creating unified European consciousness can hardly be underestimated. Vikings had intense trade with Khazars, Arabs and Byzantines. Conversion to Christianity further contributed to the inclusion of Scandinavian peoples in an European space. For more information about the Vikings see *The Viking World*, Edited by Stefan Brink in Collaboration with Neil Price, London/New York, Routledge, 2008.

²⁹ “The truly decisive factor was the appearance of cosmic dimension and of the concept of the infinite world” (*Land and Sea*, p. 34).

³⁰ *Land and Sea*, p. 38.

³¹ *Land and Sea*, p. 44-45.

³² *Land and Sea*, p. 27.

The Industrial Revolution marked the beginning of a new era. “The machine affected the relationship between man and the sea”.³³ New elemental forces emerged, which were caused by rapid technological progress. “The invention of the airplane marked the conquest of the third element, after those of land and sea”.³⁴ These fundamental changes indicate that the old *nomos* is disappearing and the new *nomos* is arising through the struggle and fighting. In this context Schmitt refers to famous aphorism of Heraclitus (“Here, Too, Are the Gods”) but we can also recall Heraclitus’s aphorism which Schmitt cites at the end of the thirteenth chapter (“War brings together...”). According to E. Mendieta, “analogously to Ratzel, Mahan, and Mackinder, but at a more philosophical level, Schmitt conceptualizes space through war, and war through space. [...] For Schmitt, in the end, all space, whether actual and material or conceptual and metaphoric, is produced by war.”³⁵

³³ *Land and Sea*, p. 54.

³⁴ *Land and Sea*, p. 57.

³⁵ See Eduardo Mendieta: *War the School of Space: The Space of War and the War for Space*, in: *Ethics, Place and Environment*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2006, p. 221. As for Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), renowned German geographer, it is very interesting that Schmitt does not mention even his name in *Land and Sea*, whereas he discusses the bulk of authors (Admiral Castex, E. Kapp, H. Melville, J. Michelet, R. Hakluyt and so on) which were directly or indirectly related to the topic. It is hardly believable that Schmitt was unaware of Ratzel and his works, because Ratzel was very famous in his time. There are some thought-provoking parallels between the two. Ratzel wrote the book entitled *The Sea as the Source of the Greatness of People. A politico-geographical study* (*Das Meer als Quelle der Völkergrösse. Eine politisch-geographische Studie*, 1900). The subtitle of *Land and Sea* is *A world-historical Reflection*. The resemblance hits the eye. Moreover, the titles and contents of several chapters in Ratzel’s work (About the Essence of Command of the Sea and Sea-peoples, Discovery of Navigation, The Historical Importance of Sea-peoples, Sea-power and Land-power) have a strong resemblance to Schmitt’s way of thought in *Land and Sea*. Ratzel discusses England’s transition to oceanic existence and he speaks about ‘continental’ and ‘oceanic’ periods and politics (See F. Ratzel: *Das Meer als Quelle der Völkergrösse, Eine politisch-geographische Studie*, second edition, München und Berlin, Druck und Verlag von R. Oldenbourg, 1911, pp. 74-76). Earlier, in his *Anthropogeography* (1899) Ratzel writes about a “glaring contradiction” between land-peoples and sea-peoples, between land-powers and sea-powers which is felt in the whole history” (See F. Ratzel:

In *Land and Sea* Schmitt pays particular attention to the human agency. Man is not “bound” to a particular element. Regardless of the struggle between elements, “man can choose, and at certain moments in his history, he may even go so far, through a gesture peculiar to him, as to change himself into a new form of his historical existence, in virtue of which he readjusts and reorganizes himself.”³⁶ As we mentioned above, in *Land and Sea* Schmitt praises the “sea-roamers”, whale-hunters, courageous travelers and discoverers who were frontiersmen in the great process of spatial revolution. Human choice of elements is influenced by a particular historical situation, by the level of technical development and so on. But with the awareness of the *nomos* construction/dissolution processes humans will be able to grasp their historical destination.³⁷

Nowadays Schmitt’s views have acquired great importance: in the age of the internet and digital communications human spatial consciousness has changed dramatically. The world is rapidly globalizing. Researching cosmic spaces, humans more and more aspire to move from the earth to the infinite spaces of our universe. What Schmitt named as “fantastic speculations”,³⁸ has become an integral part of our everyday life. The experimental stage of the project *Mars-500* finished successfully in November 2011, reinforcing humankind’s hope for future long-term space

Anthropogeographie. Grundzüge der Anwendung der Erdkunde auf die Geschichte, third edition, Stuttgart, Verlag von J. Engelhorn, 1909, p. 58). I believe that further analysis of the Schmitt-Ratzel relationship, which transcends the scope of this paper, will yield fruitful results.

³⁶ *Land and Sea*, p. 5.

³⁷ We should take into consideration the fact that Schmitt’s view is Eurocentric. As H. Schneider rightly remarks, Carl Schmitt’s view was limited with Europe and Europe’s spheres of influence (See H. Schneider: *Philosophische Geografie*, op. cit., p. 222).

³⁸ *Land and Sea*, p. 58.

travels,³⁹ powerful telescopes give us images from deep space therefore enriching our knowledge and help scientists to make scientific prognoses,⁴⁰ with the help of particle accelerators scientists aim to deepen our knowledge of our micro-universe,⁴¹ there are new discoveries in the computer and communication technologies... What will be the effects of climate change? Can we speak about *global consciousness*? What will be the next element? Will it or should it be space? Does space “lure” us like the sea which once, according to Schmitt, so powerfully “lured” humans? How will human’s spatial consciousness be changed when we reach deep space? What does *global responsibility* mean? Such questions are not futuristic. Schmitt’s *Land and Sea* is a clear confirmation of this. As the history of thought revealed, philosophy is also capable of *anticipatory reflection*. That’s why philosophers should reflect on these questions.

*For ye dislike to grope at a thread with cowardly hand; and where ye can divine, there do ye hate to calculate...*⁴²

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³⁹ For more information see http://www.esa.int/Our_Activities/Human_Spaceflight/Mars500/Welcome_back_and_thank_you_Mars500 and http://www.esa.int/Our_Activities/Human_Spaceflight/Mars500/Life_after_Mars (Accessed 01.03.2013).

⁴⁰ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-18292425> and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10136415> (Accessed 01.03.2013).

⁴¹ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-17625123> (Accessed 01.03.2013).

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus spake Zarathustra*, translated by Thomas Common, New York, The modern Library, 1917, p. 171.

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